

THE IMAGE OF INDIA IN AMERICAN CHILDREN'S FICTION

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In surveying Indian themes and images in American children's fiction, I have taken the broadest possible definition by including books by American authors, immigrants to the United States, and non-American authors whose books were originally published in America. These books span almost the entire twentieth century from 1922 to 1989. The methodology used is a critical analysis based on guidelines developed for evaluating multicultural and international fiction. The novels are examined for their setting, language and tone, presentation of Indian culture, stereotyping of characters, and recurrent themes.

It is essential to keep in mind that these books had an obvious non-Indian readership. While British authors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were engaged in a psychological rationalization of the colonization and economic exploitation of their Asian and African colonies, or were nostalgically recreating their childhoods in the British Raj, the agenda of American authors was slightly different.

They wrote interesting, fast-paced stories that were not as a rule blatantly ethnocentric. When American novels display racist bias, it is, more often than not, expressed through a preoccupation with stereotypical themes and plots.

American fictional works set in India can be broadly categorized into specific types such as colonial and historical novels, missionary novels, realistic novels, and novels that idealize nature. These novels reflect the changing attitude of the Americans towards India, from that of India as an exotic land of spirituality and wildlife to a newly-independent nation with insurmountable problems of poverty, illiteracy and lack of technology to the recent examination of the validity of Indian values, beliefs and behaviors.

The colonial novel, a genre started by Rudyard Kipling, glorifies the British Raj and the white man's burden in India. *Bhimsa*, *the Dancing Bear* and *Tiger Burning Bright* recreate a bygone era of well-tended British bungalows, regimental parades and salaaming turbaned servants. Both the novels reflect the colonial attitude of superiority through derogatory remarks and stereotypical plots aimed at illustrating the superiority of Western civilization. *Tiger Burning Bright*, by Theodora DuBois, describes the Mutiny of 1857 from the perspective of an American teenager who is a governess to a British child. As Anne Burney and her young charge escape from Delhi, the journey leads to personal growth for Anne and

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reveals the conflict between personalities and their human weaknesses. In the end, she learns to recognize that friendship, loyalty, and love transcend the narrow barriers of race, religion, and class. DuBois' attitude towards India, however, is ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, she objectively outlines the circumstances of the Mutiny from the perspectives of both the Indians and the British and states that both sides were good as well as cruel, inhuman, and biased.

On the other hand, DuBois' ethnocentricity is revealed through characterization and diction. The British characters are stereotyped as efficient, generous, and compassionate, while Indians lack discipline and honesty.

The most interesting colonial novel, however, is *Sun in the Morning*, an autobiographical narrative by Elizabeth Cadell. Like British authors Jon and Rumer Godden, Iris Macfarlane and D.R. Sherman, Cadell nostalgically recalls the pleasures of childhood and young womanhood in India. The first part of the book describes the leisurely, fun-filled childhood of the protagonist and her two best friends, Poopy and Marise, in Calcutta before World War I. In the second part, they gladly return from England—where they were sent for the duration of the war—and resume their friendship in the fashionable hill resort of Darjeeling. They are young ladies now, and their interests shift to clothes, dating eligible bachelors, and marriage. Their story ends with Poopy and Marise engaged to be married, while the protagonist moans over the loss of childhood and the total attention of her friends. As the characters live through the passage of seasons, war and peace, joy and sorrow, they form a relationship with the soil of India: They were born in India, they have roots in Anglo-Indian culture, and they enjoy the freedom from restraint that India represents.

The British Raj is also the subject of *A Garland for Gandhi*, a historical novel by Helen Pierce Jacob. Through the story of a young village girl, the novel illustrates the Gandhian concept of satyagraha and its relationship with spinning and the struggle for freedom. Tara is selected to welcome Mahatama Gandhi, who is on his way to Dandi Beach to protest against the unfair Salt Tax levied by the British government. Unfortunately, the ornate garland of flowers and gold and silver thread is accidentally ruined and a crude yarn spun by Tara is put around the Mahatma's neck instead. This simple gesture makes Tara realize that spinning, like the historic Salt March, is a symbol of national unity against British exploitation.

Another American novelist, Jean Bothwell, who spent over two decades in India, writes historical novels that ignore the British Raj and focus on the royal family of Rajasthan and the glory and intrigue of the Mughal court. In a series of exciting novels like *The Thirteenth Stone*, *The Emerald Clue*, and *Search for a Golden Bird*, Bothwell describes Rajasthan's shift from traditions to modernity at the time of Independence. If on the political level, the state symbolizes compromise and a forward-looking vision by joining the Indian union, on the personal level, the novels narrate a young princess' rebellion against the strict rules of behaviour governing high-born girls and a young prince's experience that a Rajput must be faithful in thought, wise in words, and courageous in deeds. In contrast, the novels set in the Mughal period make the historic monuments at Agra and Fatehpur Sikri come alive with intrigue, romance, and glamor. In *The Promise of a Rose*, *Ride, Zarina, Ride*, and *Dancing Princess* the political situation in Emperor Akbar's court is juxtaposed against the personal stories of the highly-independent and talented heroines. The novels give a glim-

pse of the romantic side of the emperor whose enthusiasm for matchmaking forms the background of each story. Ironically, *Omen for a Princess* focuses on the private sorrow and disappointment of Jahanara, daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan who, because of Akbar's royal decree governing Mughal princesses, cannot marry as it would further complicate the succession to the throne. Other historical novels by Bothwell are *Ring of Fate* which portrays the changes in a traditional Muslim household in pre-Partition India; *The Red Scarf* which is based on a newspaper report of a gun battle between the Rajasthan police and a bandit gang led by a young woman; and *Romany Girl* which captures the spirited and independent nature of gypsies as well as portrays the lifestyle of retired British army officers in Dehra Dun.

Bothwell's historical novels are thoroughly grounded in research, they are superbly crafted with intricate plots and well-delineated characters, and they captivate the reader with their mystery and romance. Despite the fast-paced action, Bothwell sensitively discloses the innermost thoughts of her protagonists and discusses social issues like arranged marriages, status of women, class distinctions, and the younger generation's conflict with traditions.

In sharp contrast with these historical novels are the missionary novels whose agenda is to blatantly denounce Hinduism as ineffectual, superstitious, and caste-ridden. Quite typically, they are set in villages that are characterized by drought, floods, starvation, illiteracy, lack of medical facilities, and outmoded methods of farming. Yet, these problems are somehow minimized because of the community service of the selfless missionaries and the conversion of the villagers to Christianity.

Likewise, the plots of these novels are predictable in their use of psychological

ploys and promises of food, medicine, and social equality to win converts. For instance, in *The Secret of the Drumstick Tree*, with the arrival of a single Christian family the economy of an entire Hindu village changes in one year. Even though John and his family are met with opposition and prejudice because of their foreign god, they share their advanced knowledge of farming, nutrition, and hygiene with their neighbors. When the village suffers from severe drought, help comes from the church in the form of a jeepload of food and loan of money. Similarly, *Days in the Indian Sun*, *The Buffalo and the Bell*, *Jothy*, *Vimla the Rebel*, *Chand of India*, and *Muthu* glorify the educational opportunities and medical treatment offered by the missionaries.

Another prominent theme in these novels is the unjust treatment meted out to untouchables. The heroine of *Jothy* gains in dignity and self-worth only when her family adopts Christianity. From being an outcast pariah who is ill-treated by caste Hindus, she is offered free schooling. Jothy's earlier suffering is vindicated only when the rich master's daughter is admitted to the same Christian school and she accepts Jothy as an equal. *On Small Wings* is also a vehement denunciation of the evils of Hindu society, especially as they pertain to women. The novel describes the relationship between young Muni, who was going to be killed at birth by her traditional grandmother, and Dr. Anna Harris who delivered her. Muni's parents become Christians—a sign of their regeneration—and proceed to have five daughters whom they accept and love.

Most missionary novels are structured to represent a battle between good and evil. Christianity is, thus, poised against Hinduism and the belief in Karma, or suffering for one's past sins. The Christian God is portrayed as more powerful and benevolent than the Hindu gods and god-

desses who are useless idols of mud and stone that deserve to be smashed. Similarly, the charms of the village *vaid* are ineffectual when compared with Western medicine which is available only through mission hospital. The two sets of characters are likewise stereotyped: The Christians are hardworking, kindly, forgiving, and adaptable to change; whereas the Hindus are sullen, unfriendly, narrow-minded, and superstitious. Missionary novels clearly state that if Indian villagers are to have happy lives, they must convert to Christianity.

Another genre that has a definite agenda is the realistic novel in which progress through modern technology, Western medicine, and education are compelling themes. Written mainly during the 1960's and '70's, these novels respond to the challenges facing newly-independent India. In each story, the young protagonist breaks away from traditions and the values of the older generation to usher in a new era of progress in his or her community. *The Flying Cow* by Ruth Philpott Collins, a Canadian missionary in India and Africa, typifies this type of novel. It emphasizes the backwardness of Indian villagers and their opposition to modern ideas of breeding cattle, scientific methods of farming, class structure, and schooling for boys and girls. Another novel of village reform is Wyckoff's *Kumar*. When Kumar, the young protagonist of progress moves to the village, he finds that his progressive attitude towards superstitions, religion, untouchability and status of women offends the orthodox beliefs of the villagers. However, once he enrolls in the village school, the teacher, who is a disciple of Gandhi, involves him in the work of the Congress Party to educate youth. He is taught that India's fight for independence is also a fight for the freedom and rights of women and untouchables. The schoolmaster's efforts are paralled by the Ameri-

can missionary's work with untouchables. The story ends with Independence in 1947 and an enlightened attitude in the village. *The Left-Handed Chank* by Shirley Arora also focuses on the lack of technical knowledge and superstitious beliefs of a fishing village in South India. The villagers suspect the Inspector of Fisheries for his scientific research on fishing conditions and his efforts to educate the villagers. It is only after the Inspector saves them from a storm at sea through modern communication that the villagers trust him completely and form a cooperative society for more scientific fishing.

Another novel worthy of mention, *Yougga Finds Mother Teresa*, which was originally written in French, is a devastating exposure of India's poverty and the exploitation of young children. It fictionalizes the work of Mother Teresa with the poor of India through the adventures of a crippled boy who is sold as a beggar by his family. The book's only claim to recognition is the portrayal of Yougga who never once loses his human dignity. He rises above his miserable circumstances by enjoying the beautiful moments of his life: he remembers his family with love, his relationship with his owner brings adventure to his otherwise dreary existence, and he meets two holy men who empower him with positive thoughts. Perhaps, the most patronizing novel in this category is Margery Sharp's fantasy, *Miss Bianca in the Orient*, in which Miss Bianca, the energetic President of Mouse Prisoners' Aid Society, goes to the Orient to rescue the Ranees' page from being trampled to death by the royal elephant. Amidst the exotic splendor of marble palaces, reflecting pools, and rich brocades and gems is cruelty and a lack of regard for human life. Miss Bianca's adventure reflects the Eurocentric bias that oriental institutions are ineffectual, the characters frivolous and capricious, and the kingdoms poorly

managed. It is the do-gooder heroine who single-handedly rescues the oppressed prisoner and ends the Rance's reign of terror.

Another compelling theme in these realistic novels is rural education. Arora's *What Then, Raman?* states that the lack of educational facilities in villages is a major hindrance to progress. Life is difficult and survival often the only concern of villagers. Young boys like Raman are forced to leave school and help their parents because of crop failure. Similarly, Indian author Rama Mehta, who published *Keshav of India* and *Ramu: A Story of India* in the U.S., also states that the future happiness of villages depends on the education of young boys. In both the novels, each family member feels a sense of responsibility and is willing to sacrifice a personal dream, possession, or comfort for the greater good. Through her eloquent prose, Mehta presents the intricate fabric of village life and juxtaposes the villagers' philosophical acceptance of good and bad times with the urban impatience for progress. In contrast, *Geeta and the Village School* handles the familiar theme of rural education for girls in a unique and sensitive manner. It is not the traditional villagers who are opposed to change, but Geeta herself who is reluctant to go to school because of her shy and timid personality.

Like the missionary novels, these novels of progress also emphasize the lack of medical facilities in Indian villages and the exemplary service rendered by foreign doctors and agencies. Carey Douglas in *White Fawn of Phalera* finds that age-old customs and superstitions interfere with medical practice in a Rajasthani village. The situation becomes tense, and potentially dangerous when the American doctor's son and his Indian friend rescue a white fawn. The analogy of the white fawn is used ironically: While Carey in her

white uniform brings comfort and hope, the albino deer represents bad luck to the villagers and they stay away from the hospital. The Americans are incensed at the villagers' ingratitude, and they shame the villagers into acknowledging they are wrong.

Realistic novels, while they accurately chronicle the problems of life in India, are, nevertheless, overburdened by their themes depicting progress and stereotypical plots. India with its centuries-long tradition, they imply, should transport itself into the modern age without a struggle. The only worthwhile books in this category are *Keshav of India*, *Sword of a Warrior*, *Chikka*, *Little Flute Player*, and *The Lost Kingdom* because they successfully portray the urgency for reform prompted by the material circumstances of the characters as well as depict the characters' feelings, dreams, temptations, and successes. The protagonists attain dignity and stature as they attempt to better their lives while remaining proud of their ancient heritage.

The last category of fiction, the nature novels which are imbued with the spirit of romanticism, altogether dismisses the urban culture as decadent and presents an Edenic or idealized vision of nature and Eastern spirituality. To this group belong British and European novels like *Lost Horizon*, *Kingdom of the Elephants*, *Mountain of Truth*, *Mission to Tibet*, *Freedom for a Cheetah*, *Duel in the Hills*, *Ramlal*, *Elephants of Sargabal*, and *Prince of the Jungle*. These novels narrate exotic legends of man-eaters, evoke the glamor and thrill of training cheetahs, and celebrate the mystical relationship between nature and humans.

Prominent among the American books is Pearl Buck's *The Big Fight*, which is based on an incident Buck witnessed while making a film for R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*. It is a dramatic story of a mock

fight between Raj, a circus tiger, and his circumsmate, the old and tired leopard, Meera. Staging the fight between the two tame animals lends both humor and tension to the story. The circus manager's plan to first starve Raj and Meera and then make them fight over a pet deer fails because both animals have been in captivity for so long that they do not recognize live bait as meat. Eventually, it is the smell of some rotting meat that prompts the indolent beasts to leap into the air and crash into each other. Ironically, it is the deer who shows courage and fury by butting the leopard, who rushes to the safety of her cage in terror. Buck makes a strong statement that the animals in captivity have so forgotten their true natures that neither species knows who is the predator and who the victim.

Another thought-provoking novel is *Gift of the Forest* by Reginald Lal Singh and Eloise Lownsbury. When the hero, Bim, adopts an abandoned tiger cub, the mixed reactions of family and neighbors represent the various ways in which nature and wildlife are viewed. To his saintly grandfather, the jungle is an initiation into the philosophy of ahimsa and transcendentalism; to the superstitious villagers, the tiger is an object of fear; and to the Maharajah, wildlife is a means of entertainment and material gain. As the tiger grows, Bim's love for his pet prompts him to free the tiger so that he can explore the wider world of the jungle and find his true nature.

Dhan Gopal Mukerji, who immigrated to the United States in 1910 and committed suicide in 1936, wrote jungle fantasies that raise our awareness of the exploitation of wildlife and force us to recognize our spiritual affinity with nature. In *Chief of the Herd*, *Hari, the Jungle Lad*, and *Kari the Elephant*, Mukerji lovingly describes the organized community of elephants. Each story reveals the law of the

jungle, the elephants' mating rituals and care of the young, their emotions of sorrow, revenge, guilt, and joy, and, above all, their humane and just behavior. The elephants are portrayed as elevated beings who face all situations with intelligence, courage, and dignity, and they even have a sense of religion and the divine.

In Mukerji's 1928 Newbery book, *Gay Neck*, the pigeon-hero's noble ancestry is reflected in his personality and conduct when he and his companion, Hira, become carrier pigeons for the Indian contingent of the British army during World War I. Their mission is to go behind German lines to reconnoitre and locate an ammunition site so that a bombing can be staged. Although Gay Neck survives the war, Hira is killed while carrying out the mission—his near-death encounters with violence and destruction leave him full of fear. Upon returning to Calcutta, Gay Neck is taken to a lamasery where he is healed of his decaying emotions through prayers, meditation, and positive thoughts.

Recurring themes and symbols from Mukerji's animal fantasies appear in his stories of human protagonists as well. On the surface, *Jungle Beasts and Men*, *Ghond, the Hunter*, and *Hari, the Jungle Lad* may appear to perpetuate the exotic image of India with its teeming wildlife, tiger hunts, elephant training, quaint ceremonies, and holy men. But, through his poetic prose and carefully-chosen details, Mukerji encourages readers to re-evaluate themselves as social beings. His novels illustrate that fear leads to irrational behavior and that through love, spirituality, and self-purification human beings can purge themselves of hate and fear and become truly civilized. Both non-violence and destruction are integrated in his overall vision of harmony: Everything is a facet of the divine. With the present threat of nuclear war and the problems of poverty, racism, and destruction of eco-

logy, Mukerji's message of oneness with creation where humans, animals, and birds can live in peace is still relevant.

In the last decade, the number of novels set in the Indian subcontinent has decreased; however, a definite shift from the above limited themes and genres can be detected. Most novels published in the 1980's tend to explore the human situation in a more meaningful way. The most prominent among these novels is Malcolm Bosse's *Ganesh*. Ganesh, a fourteen-year-old American boy who is born and raised in India, suffers from an identity crisis when he is orphaned and has to live with a widowed aunt in a small rural town in the United States. If in India he looked like a foreigner but felt Indian, in the American Midwest, he looks American but is regarded as Indian. Ganesh bridges the vast gap between East and West by acknowledging his family roots in the ancestral house built by his great-grandfather, and by adapting Hindu rituals and yoga to his new environment. On the political level, he suggests a uniquely Indian solution to his aunt's battle with the country to save her house from being torn down for a new highway. He organizes a successful Gandhian-style fast-unto-death, which teaches his aunt and American classmates that the philosophical and spiritual strength of satyagraha is relevant to and viable in a Western setting.

Likewise, *Children of the Wolf*, although it recreates the drama and tension of the recovery and education of two feral children from the Sal Forest in Bengal in 1920, focuses on the inner growth of a young student in an orphanage. The fruitless attempts of the British missionary to teach Amala and Kamala to wear clothes, walk upright, use language, and eat cooked food are presented from the perspective of the quiet and sensitive Mohandas who is entrusted with their education. Mohandas accepts the two girls

for what they are and is ashamed of the missionary's efforts to "civilize" the two beings who had harmed no one. The girls represent his unspoken, solitary self, and in attempting to teach them through genuine caring, he overcomes his own weakness to communicate.

The most recent novel, *Shabanu*, which is set in the Cholistan Desert in Pakistan, touchingly unfolds the painful adolescence of a young Pathan girl. By sensitively describing the thoughts and feelings of Shabanu, this novel has broadened the scope of fiction set in the subcontinent. Hopefully, in the future, American authors will not dwell only on the exotic setting and backwardness of this region, but will attempt to explore the conflict between modern and traditional values, the problems of growing up, and the dreams and hopes of Indian children with understanding and depth.

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